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Performing science-fiction fandom through debating controversy: Communicative leisure, collective memory and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* below the line at *The Guardian*

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Abstract

Star Wars has become one of a handful of science-fiction franchises that have defined and shaped what Adorno calls the modern culture industry. The original trilogy challenged the way Hollywood financed and marketed its movies and made George Lucas incredibly rich. Star Wars fans bought tickets for re-releases, special editions and the notoriously egregious prequels, as well as a seemingly endless range of merchandise. When Lucas sold the franchise to Disney new movies were promised, including what became the stand-alone prequel *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. In this paper, I am interested in exploring how people react in publicly accessible online spaces, as these are key spaces for the performativity of digital communicative leisure. Specifically, I am interested in how fans of the original trilogy and the Star Wars franchise critiqued or defended the film and Star Wars more broadly through a detailed analysis online comments below the line reacting to review by film critic Mark Kermode published in a middle-class, liberal newspaper: the UK-based *The Guardian*. This review and its comments below the line represent a snapshot of what middle-class liberals might feel able to write about the film and their own Star Wars fandom. This analysis will also be extended to critiques made by people seeking to distance themselves from Star Wars and all that Star Wars fandom may entail, as a performativity of anti-fandom. I will show that for fans collective memory is used to try to construct authenticity and ownership of Star Wars, but that collective memory is only ever temporarily negotiated.

Keywords: Star Wars, Disney, collective memory, communicative leisure, performativity

Word count: 7471

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Introduction

Star Wars is one of the most significant sources for how we think of and understand science-fiction fandom and popular culture. When we think of how fans are represented in the public sphere, we typically think of the angry Star Wars fan unhappy with George Lucas, the creator of the franchise and owner of Lucasfilm. The original film (Lucas 1977) generated an enormous global fan-base and those fans stuck with the film through the original trilogy, even if critics mocked the third film's furry Ewoks (Taylor 2015). When Lucas started to re-make the trilogy, adding new effects, changing bits here and there and altering a sequence when Han Solo shot Greedo, fans were angered. When the prequels were released, fans were unhappy with Jar-Jar Binks, poor computer-generated images (CGI) and the content of the stories (Lyden 2012; Taylor 2015), but at the same time the expanded universe was explored in games and comics (Booth 2017). Star Wars, then, has become one of a handful of SF franchises that have defined and shaped what Adorno (1991) calls the modern culture industry. The original trilogy challenged the way Hollywood financed and marketed its movies and made George Lucas incredibly rich. Star Wars fans bought tickets for re-releases, special editions and the allegedly egregious prequels, as well as a seemingly endless range of merchandise (Booth 2017; Curley 2017; Taylor 2015). When Lucas sold the franchise to Disney new movies were promised, including what became the stand-alone prequel *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (Edwards 2016). When the first film of the new trilogy *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Abrams 2015) emerged, many fans loved the way the director J J Abrams homage to the tone and feel of the original trilogy, while combining the best effects Disney's budget could purchase. For other fans, however, the film was dismissed as an inauthentic re-production of Star Wars mythology. Lucasfilm had licensed a series of novels and comics exploring what had happened after the original trilogy, but in the sale to Disney this alternative future of Mara Jade and the twin children of Han and Leia was excised from the memory of what fans had believed to be the canon (Taylor 2015). Other fans were angry at Disney, Abrams and Lucasfilm for embracing progressive choices in casting and the construction of a female lead character (Brown 2018; Curley 2017).

In this paper, I am interested in exploring how people react in publicly accessible online spaces, as these are key spaces for the performativity of what Spracklen (2015) has identified as digital communicative leisure. Specifically, I am interested in how fans of the original trilogy and the Star Wars franchise critiqued or defended *Rogue One* and Star Wars more broadly through a detailed analysis of online comments, below the line, reacting to a review by film critic Mark Kermode, published in a middle-class, liberal newspaper: the UK-based *The Guardian*. Kermode is a respected and well-known film enthusiast and journalist who has sustained a career in making intelligent, thoughtful criticism. Kermode (2016) begins his review by saying:

The first of the new series of Star Wars spin-offs (or “anthology” films), this standalone instalment sits between the last of George Lucas’s disappointing digital prequels *Revenge of the Sith* and his winningly physical original Star Wars. Fittingly, British director Gareth Edwards’s dark and moody space opera bridges the gap between the old-school 70s charm and ultra-modern 21st-century wizardry of this still evolving series. Despite using cutting-edge CGI to breathe uncanny artificial life into characters we never thought we’d see again, *Rogue One* feels like part of the same cinematic universe that gave us *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) – the high-water mark to which all subsequent episodes aspire.

This is for Kermode a film that both fits the Star Wars aesthetic and universe perfectly, but also one that gets four out of five stars. He ends by arguing that ‘Edwards appears to have elevated what could have been simply a cash-in into something that feels essential, even magical. It has the distinct smell of victory.’

This review and its comments below the line¹ represent a snapshot of what middle-class liberals might feel able to write about the film and their own Star Wars fandom in their own performativity of identity-making. This analysis will also be extended to critiques made by people seeking to distance themselves from Star Wars and all that Star Wars fandom may entail, as a performativity of anti-fandom. I will show that, for fans, collective memory is used to try to construct authenticity and ownership of Star Wars, but that collective memory is only ever temporarily negotiated. Before I reach the analysis and discussion, I need to outline the theoretical framework I am using – alluded to above – and place it in the wider development

¹ This is a long-established usage on the internet.

of leisure studies and leisure theory. After that, I will briefly outline my methodological choices and provide a rationale.

Theoretical Framework

Leisure Studies and Leisure Theory

Leisure studies emerged as an academic subject field in the second half of the twentieth century. In the post-war period and into the 1970s, a number of academics and policy-makers became interested in the problem and potential of leisure, as discussed by Chris Rojek (2010) (see also Spracklen 2009). The problem of leisure was actually the problem of the leisure society, as seen in science-fiction novels and movies of the time: the problems of people having too much leisure time because of the loss of jobs to robots and computers and people then becoming angry or bored or revolutionary (Moylan 2000). Nearly all scholars recognised this problem as one that was about to happen across the world. Stanley Parker, for example, was a British civil servant who became one of the founders of British leisure studies. In his famous book *The Future of Work and Leisure*, Parker (1971) set out to show that sociologists, cultural theorists, philosophers and political scientists all had ideas about how leisure in modernity appeared and how leisure could be shaped. In this book, Parker set out his own model of the relationship between leisure and work and the need for policy-makers to ensure that leisure lives were meaningful and useful. Like the other first generation of leisure studies scholars, Parker believed that leisure time was a moral good, a human right, but only if filled with morally good leisure activities. As the 1970s progressed, governments and local authorities invested heavily in the kinds of leisure activities and spaces they believed to have potential at providing meaning and purpose (Rojek 2010; Spracklen 2009).

Leisure studies in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, then, saw two divergent trends. On the one hand, there was a wealth of research and theorising about good leisure and how to fully realise the benefits of good leisure (Kelly 1983). In this research, leisure activities that did not clearly improve one's psychological or physiological wellbeing – such as drinking, watching television or being a fan of science-fiction - were dismissed as bad leisure habits compared to the healthy and morally good sports and active recreations, or not regarded as leisure at all. On the other hand, sociologists of leisure drawing on structuralist theories of class, gender and race claimed that leisure served as a site for social constraint. Inspired by Gramsci (1971) and Raymond Williams (1977), John Clarke and Chas Critcher wrote the classic Marxist attack on the idea that leisure choices are freely made. In their book *The Devil Makes Work: Leisure in Capitalist Britain*, Clarke and Critcher (1985) show that modern leisure is made by capitalism

and nation-states as a place where the working-classes and other marginal groups can be controlled.

Leisure studies into the 1990s and 2000s saw both these trends merge into what may be described as the postmodern leisure turn (Spracklen 2009). Rojek was one of the most important theorists of postmodern leisure. In *Decentring Leisure*, Rojek (1995) suggests we live in uncertain, fluid times. The age of social structures and inequalities is being replaced by a world of postmodern identity formations and hybridities. Jobs are being outsourced and automated and we have entered an age that might be correctly delineated as the age of postmodernity (or what Bauman [2000] refers to as liquid modernity). This is the age of globalization and mobilities and of new technologies, where people around the world can find meaning and purpose through attachment to sports, music and other forms of popular culture (Spracklen 2009). In this new age, Rojek (1995) suggests leisure itself has become postmodern. There is no good leisure or bad leisure, no essential identity ascribed to different leisure activities. He argues that in postmodernity structures have dissolved, but hegemony has also dissolved because postmodernism challenges all ontology and epistemologies, so it is possible for anyone to pick and choose their leisure choices without being barred from taking part by taste-makers and elites. Leisure, for Rojek, is just one of many other spaces where individuals might make sense of their postmodern, fluid and hybrid lives.

Communicative and Digital Leisure

I have identified communicative leisure and instrumental leisure as two competing kinds of leisure that allow leisure studies and leisure theory to make sense of all three kinds of leisure outlined above: leisure as free choice; leisure as constraint; and postmodern leisure (Spracklen 2009). Communicative leisure and instrumental leisure map onto what Habermas (1984, 1987) shows are the two ways in which we think and act today: communicative rationality; and instrumentality or instrumental rationality. Communicative rationality is the free way of thinking, talking and acting that allows for the historical development of the public sphere in the Enlightenment (Habermas 1989). This is the logic of liberalism and science. But liberalism and science lead to capitalism and the rise of instrumental logic: the reduction of all actions to the calculation of their economic cost-benefits. For Habermas, communicative rationality and the public sphere are the powers that create our modern lifeworld, but the lifeworld today is threatened by its colonization by instrumentality associated with bureaucracies and global capitalism. In my re-casting of Habermas, communicative leisure is leisure as free choice and postmodern leisure: it is the leisure that we do because it gives us meaning and purpose as social animals. But instrumental leisure is the form of leisure made by

industries, corporations, governments and elites to keep us paying money for our own enslavement (Adorno 1991; Gramsci 1971; Habermas 1984; Williams 1977).

More recently, I extended this model to exploring leisure online in the book *Digital Leisure* (Spracklen 2015). Here I show that digital leisure is just like any other form of leisure – it can be communicative, or instrumental (Spracklen 2015). However, the internet is not our saviour, it is not a Habermasian public sphere. Instead, despite claims to the otherwise when the internet was first invented, the internet is still largely mediated by a small number of corporations and the policed by the security agencies of nation-states. There is communicative leisure when people choose to find their fellow fans or activists to connect and feel belonging, but all too often online spaces are used for other instrumental reasons. Therefore, comments below the line responding to writing by critical experts in the culture industry, as in this paper, are interesting leisure phenomena to explore. How much freedom and agency do these fans have to construct their own identity and how much of that identity is instrumental?

Methods

The comments that form the data-set for this paper are ‘below the line’ comments on a review (Kermode 2016) of the film *Rogue One* published on the web-site of *The Guardian*. There were 517 comments at the time I undertook this research in 2018 and most had been posted in the days and weeks following the review’s publication. Below the line means comments posted below online articles by individuals expressing opinions, arguing and performing identities (Wolfgang 2018). These comments are made by people who choose to add to the debate. They are not representative in a statistical sense of the opinions of people who read the original article, nor are they representative of any wider population (such as, for example: taste-makers, fandom, the United Kingdom, the global North, the world). It is, rather, a very partial sub-set of any wider group, even the group that consists of those who have read the original article. People self-select to take in conversations below-the-line and have to have access to technology and other forms of capital to take part (Spracklen 2015). Commentators have to be motivated enough to sign-in, or set up an account, to make a comment on anything – so naturally they will be individuals who feel most strongly about the subject or who wish to express their thoughts in this public forum. Comments below-the-line can be and are made anonymously, though the content-owners typically have access to people’s emails and other personal details. This means for every considered thought there will be a joke or a trolling (Phillips 2015). Offensive material will often be removed by moderators, though this does not seem to have

happened in this case. But as such, they make ideal places where we might observe the construction of fan identities through the use of communicative leisure

I have used convenience sampling to limit the research project. I have concentrated on one newspaper and one film because it makes it easier to capture the tone of the debate. I chose *The Guardian* because it is a globally renowned, UK-based newspaper with a progressive, liberal agenda. Its readership in the UK remains predominately left-wing, urban, middle-class bourgeoisie. But that also means that right-wing users of the internet frequently use the below the line comments space to debate left-wing readers and challenge left-wing politics. I chose a review of *Rogue One* because it was the first stand-alone Star Wars film to be made under the new Disney regime, which came after the first new sequel, which many Star Wars fans rejected or turned against (Brown 2018). I chose Mark Kermode only because he was the first critic on the newspaper to write a review of the film. As with much of my research. I have made sense of the data by using Discourse Tracing (LeGreco and Tracey 2009), which is not formal discourse analysis but rather a guide to make sense of macro, meso and micro-discourses in formation. This Discourse Tracing allowed me to develop and identify the themes in the analysis: rejecting science-fiction fandom?; rejecting science-fiction fandom; pursuing authenticity; performing science-fiction fandom - rejecting (some) Star Wars; and rejecting Disney. All are performative in nature as people are not forced to make these comments.²

Analysis

Rejecting Science-Fiction Fandom?

The second post to the review seems to be a straight-forward rejection of Star Wars. Somebody with the user name OneAnotherName at 09:17 on 18 December 2016 states boldly that:

We went to the Odeon to see No Man's Land with Ian McKellen and Captain Picard. It was very good.

A user called Pol101 respond to this at 10:14 on 18 December 2016 with a snotty put-down of the original person:

² Of course, some of them may well be bots programmed to react in certain ways by various nefarious agencies. And some may be humans being paid or coerced to react in certain ways. But even so, they are still performing according to what those agencies and coercers think is freely and through communicative action. That is, they are programmed or instructed to act as if they are free agents with free opinions.

I've seen both this week; if something that's esoteric, boring and pretentious is what you're after, then yeah sure. But check you, going to the theatre! Aren't you academic instead of the plebs that went to Starwars!

For Pol101, OneAnotherName is acting as a cultural elitist, preferring the distinction and cultural capital of going to the theatre (Bourdieu 1986). By making the claim that they had gone to see Harold Pinter play instead of watching *Rogue One*, it does seem that OneAnotherName is rejecting SF fandom. But while it is true to say the claim positions OneAnotherName against the 'plebs' who have gone to see *Rogue One*, the original post displays knowing humour about science-fiction. *No Man's Land* in London in December 2016 starred Ian McKellan and Patrick Stewart – who famously played Captain Jean-Luc Picard in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The original poster obviously knows the two stars of the play are world-famous for their starring roles in genre movies and many of the people watching them star in the new production have paid their money because they want to see Gandalf and Picard, not McKellen and Stewart. That is, OneAnotherName is evidently someone who appreciates and knows their work in genre movies and may well be a fan of that work themselves.³ At first it seems strange that Pol101 feels the need to position the first poster's argument that theatre is something 'academic' (bourgeois or high-brow?) against the mass cultural consumption of Star Wars. Readers of *The Guardian* are not normally on the side of the plebs – they are generally liberal elites who prefer Art to commodified, popular culture. But Pol101 also says they have been to see the play, too, so actually they are performing the role of the middle-class cultural omnivore at home in a multiplex or a gallery (Emmison 2003).

Rejecting Science-Fiction Fandom

Most of the posters under-the-line are science-fiction fans of some description. But for some, science-fiction is something that they have to distance themselves from completely. Someone called Murty Ganti posts on 18 December 2016 at 23:20 with an eviscerating critique of the film and Star Wars and science-fiction films more generally:⁴

This hapless movie, which we actually got free tickets for as a promotion for I heart radio, is a perfect example of how 'mediocrity' seeps in when 'bean counters' make decisions instead of creative process. They have to write a story that includes all box

³ This could also be read in the context of the rivalry between Star Wars and Star Trek fandoms.

⁴ All comments published in this paper are (sic.). I have made no attempt to correct the spelling and grammar and facticity of any claims.

office demographics, a child actor, a female, a spanish bero and of course a chinese wise man (china is the biggest market). So it wasn't even worth when its free. The storm troopers can't shoot straight if their life depended on them. In the age of faster than light travel the guns can't find their targets, Darth Vader 'outsources' his venom for an ounce of gratuitous 'violence'. It obvious the 2 hr format doesn't cut anymore for story telling. Hence the birth of netflix and HBO series that tell a better and engrossing story. To sum it up, this movie is utter trash, there is nothing redeeming.

This post is a model performance of the enraged, lesser-spotted troll lurking below the line. This is a particular discursive formation that wants us to believe it is objectively assessing the merit of the film and not passing judgement on the Disney version of Star Wars and dismissing all science-fiction films. Whatever the actual history, it seems Murty Ganti has reluctantly gone to watch *Rogue One*, or rather, he (he must be a he, given the comment about a 'female') wants us to think he has gone to the film by accident and not on purpose. He begins by telling us it is flawed because it has been written by 'bean counters', the accountants and managers at Disney. It is worrying for him because those people in Hollywood are interfering with the 'creative process', the vision of the director, as if no one has ever thought about profits in the movie industry until Lucasfilm sold-out to Disney. The gratuitous aside about demographics places Murty Ganti as someone who thinks having non-white and female lead characters is the end of the world. In fact, it is the end of the world for angry white, heterosexual men who think they own Star Wars, its legacy and its future (Brown 2018; Taylor 2015).

Murty Ganti then performs the role of someone who dislikes Star Wars and science-fiction fandom when he dismisses the conventions of Star Wars. No stormtrooper is ever able to shoot straight, but all space operas from Flash Gordon onwards have heroes dodging bullets and being better than the baddies. This is a staple of science-fiction drama, if not of serious science-fiction where authors ensure everything is as real as it can be. The complaint about Darth Vader seems even stranger. He must know that Darth Vader is very busy being violent at crucial moments in the first three films at least. One suspects here that the poster has seen Star Wars many times and is trying – in this performativity - to make out he has not seen it.

Other rejections of Star Wars and science-fiction fandom are couched differently to that posted by Murty Ganti. Paul Riley posts on 18 December 2016 at 10:00 probably the angriest rejection of science-fiction fandom:

It proves how dumb people are this was not a great movie it was a decent movie. It was flawed, repetitive and boring in large parts. If this movie had no connection to Star Wars most people would have seen meh it was alright but because it was connected to Star Wars it's brilliant. OH give it up. No wonder the planet is ruined and you let Trump, Farage, Brexit etc ruin civilization. Unlike the movie there is NO HOPE

Paul Riley clearly believes Star Wars fans who praise *Rogue One* are losing their ability to think critically about the franchise. But he is despairing more about the way people are arguing about the merits of this extension to the franchise when there are so many things wrong in politics and current affairs. He seems to think the reason climate change is happening and populism is on the rise is because too many people are allowing themselves to be distracted by Star Wars, science-fiction and popular culture. He may well be right, though it could be that popular culture, science-fiction and Star Wars actually help educate people about politics and science and offer people spaces in which we can feel free and be free (Curley 2017). He suggests people are spending too much time and effort arguing on-line about Star Wars, but he lets himself down by being one of those people doing the arguing.

Pursuing Authenticity

Although I did not do a formal analysis of content, a clear majority of the posts are in favour of *Rogue One* and Star Wars more generally. For some of the latter posters, their engagement below-the-line shows a clear attempt at pursuing authenticity; performing the role of the fan who loved Star Wars as a child and still loves it all now, even if they think some of the movies along the way have not been outstanding. All of the posters who present themselves as authentic fans make a big play of showing-off their long-term engagement with Star Wars and of being a long-term hardcore fan. That is, these fans are trying to prove they are 'proper' fans against people who drift in and out of Star Wars fandom: these are fans who want us to think have all the toys, the comics and the novels, the fans who know who Mara Jade is (Booth 2017; Taylor 2015). A poster calling himself (he calls himself a lad) sidneys posts on 18 December 2016 at 11:17:

I thought this film was fantastic. As a young lad Star Wars rocked my world and Empire Strikes Back cemented its place as the most important film series of my childhood. Since those two magical films however, it's been downhill with Ewoks, Jar Jar Binks and other such nonsense. Someone really should have told Lucas to get a grip. Force Awakens was OK, but the annoyance of yet another Death Star plot took away from

the overall success of the film. But *Rogue One* was a return to a more purist *Star Wars*, with seriousness and menace and many great cameos. *Star Wars* struck a chord with 7 year old me. But *Rogue One* struck an even deeper chord with 45 year old me. The father-daughter relationship at the heart of the film was something I could relate to and was very unexpected. At the end of the film I actually cried. I don't know why....maybe a reminder of the young me who watched wide eyed and spent the rest of his childhood wanting to be a rebel fighter, or the modern me who is so grateful that the film series is returned to greatness again.

This post begins with the autobiographical note that places him watching the original film and being blown away by it. His post then slips into critiquing George Lucas for the Ewoks in *Return of the Jedi* (Marquand 1983) and for Jar-Jar Binks and the prequels. But he writes as a fan who wants us to know he is faithful to the whole franchise. He is happy now that the new films are with us and is brought to tears by *Rogue One* even if he thinks *The Force Awakens* relied too much on the same old plotline of smashing the evil people's big machine. His post certainly moves the poster Miamijim to respond on 18 December 2016 13:13 with this incredible story:

47 years old (when the original came out) I took my 8 yr old son to see this on Friday night, I too cried at the end as I could not believe they had managed to make something so perfect as to evoke feelings in me that put me back in my 8 yr old body sat next to y Dad in the cinema in Basildon, I'm not a natural born smiler, but my son turned to me near the end and said 'Dad, You're smiling' and you know what he was right a had a grin across my face that left aches in my cheeks for an hour after the film finished, Gareth Edwards you delivered perfection, a film that tied in to episode IV in such a way as life a 49 year old movie even higher up in my esteem... well done sir well done

The opening words of the first sentence are incorrect. As he (again, the poster identified himself as a dad) tells us, he was eight when he went to see *Star Wars* with his dad. Now he has gone to see *Rogue One* with his son and they are having a father-son moment in exactly the same way he had a father-son moment with his father. He does not tell us what his father thought of *Star Wars*. But we know the poster was clearly smitten by the story and the effects and the action and feels proud as a father to be sharing the joy of *Star Wars* with this iteration

of the franchise. Both of these posters use their histories as authentic, long-standing Star Wars fans to give weight to their arguments that *Rogue One* is the best one yet.

Performing Science-Fiction Fandom: Rejecting (some) Star Wars

For some fans, the communicative leisure being used in performing their love of Star Wars and science-fiction more generally is reflected in the way they love *Rogue One* while simultaneously rejecting some parts of the wider franchise. For example, somebody posting under the name SheedysLeftFoot makes this comment on 18 December 2016 at 23:16:

I watched it yesterday and feared the worst after the emo-sulk filled awfulness of The Force Awakens.... Wow. Just wow. So very good indeed. Beautifully filmed and packed full of fun, little nods to the other movies and some lovely details. But more than anything it was fun. Vader, slicing and dicing rebels. Grand Moff Tarkin, sneering and menacing. Ponda Baba and Evazan from the Cantina....it was just awesome entertainment that transported be back 30 years.

For this fan, *Rogue One* is much better than the *The Force Awakens*, which the poster dooms for its ‘emo-sulk filled awfulness’. This is obviously a reference to the son of Leia and Han, Ben, who as evil Kylo Ren levels lots of anger and resentment at his parents. Kylo Ren is not a good replacement for Darth Vader, but his conflicted emotions do make him a more real character. We see in him the age-old dramatic tension between fathers and sons and the burden of becoming an adult in a confusing world. SheedysLeftFoot, however, wants us to think that this emotion is too much and the reference to emos makes Kylo Ren the poster boy of every teenage girl falling in love with the lead singer of an emo band. Obviously teenage girls are not allowed to feel love and lust for characters on screen, unlike all those boys who fell in love for Princess Leia. We cannot know the gender of this poster, but we can guess he is probably male – certainly the posts reproduce the hegemonic Gender Order where women’s emotions are seen as over-powering their reasons and making them less rational (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, the poster moves on to demonstrate their knowledge and appreciation of the original trilogy and the wider franchise. They love *Rogue One* completely and without quibble because it fits into the original trilogy and services fans with dozens of references and homages (‘easter eggs’) to those films. SheedysLeftFoot does not only recognise the two evil extras from the Cantina scene who appear briefly here, but he knows their names too.

Another example of communicative leisure performing fandom while rejecting Star Wars is this one by PatrickWReed, which he posts a day later than many of the others below-the-line, on 19 December 2016 at 11:14:

I absolutely loved it and I'm so happy to say that after being largely disappointed with The Force Awakens. It was the prequel the prequel trilogy never managed to provide, in that it actually provided additional context and historical and moral weight to bits of A New Hope that otherwise just felt rather glossed over and explained away plot holes in the original film without feeling like it was going out of its way just to do so.

Again, this fan tells us he loves the film because he sees it as a true prequel to the original film. He correctly but somewhat pedantically calls the first film *A New Hope*, which is what George Lucas started to call *Star Wars* when he realised it was the first (or rather, the fourth) episode of a bigger tale. The fact is that *Star Wars* was first released to cinemas as *Star Wars*, without the subtitle *Episode Four: A New Hope* (Taylor 2015). Only dedicated Star Wars fans or people trying to perform that role call the film *A New Hope* in everyday conversation. This fan tells us he was disappointed with *The Force Awakens*, though he does not bother to explain why – we can only guess. But he says he does not rate the prequel trilogy because it did not serve to provide additional context and historical and moral weight. One wonders what films he has been watching, because the prequel trilogy provides the rise of Anakin Skywalker and his betrayal of the Jedi, his transformation into Darth Vader, the rise of Palpatine, the downfall and massacre of the Jedi, the birth of Leia and Luke the twins fathered by Anakin. Now the prequels may have many problems of style, scripting, acting performances and CGI design, but they certainly provide all the context anyone might need. The combined anger with George Lucas about Jar-Jar Binks and midichlorians still seems to exist many years after the prequels were released (Booth 2017; Curley 2017) and PatrickWReed has demonstrated to us that he is one of those fans who felt that betrayal. *Rogue One*, then, is a win for him because it is better than anything Lucas did since the original trilogy – a view expressed of course by Kermode in the review in *The Guardian*.

Rejecting Disney

Some fans demonstrated and performed their fandom by rejecting Disney as being an unethical trans-national corporation determined to maximise its profits by making films that were safe and pandering to the specific needs of its global demographic: family-friendly fun, two-dimensional emotional challenges, with no problematic morality-tales or sex (Choi 2012;

Giroux and Pollock 2010). For some fans, this still means that the new Disney films are worth watching, for others the involvement of Disney has ruined their idea of what Star Wars should be about. One of the former versions of Disney-rejection is found fairly soon in the comments below-the-line. As RobO83 puts it when he posts on 18 December 2016 at 09:38:

Disney won't produce a bad Star Wars film. However, they will take any risk or edge out of the equation. The Force Awakens was initially entertaining but on subsequent viewings it's lack of new ideas is frustrating at best and annoying at worst. Another Death Star type weapon really was lazy. As for rogue one it is better than the force awakens but I am oddly left feeling Edwards wanted to bring us something more of a departure to what Star Wars films have been. Saying all that it is worth seeing and that's all that Disney really cares about.

For Rob083, watching *Rogue One* is like eating fast food from a global chain of restaurants. It feels okay and meets a need, but it does not give him any lasting pleasure or fulfilment. Watching *The Force Awakens* is like eating an ersatz-version of his favourite home-made childhood meal made by a fast-food chain. He condemns *The Force Awakens* for being a lazy copy of *Star Wars* and thinks the weapon that has to be destroyed is a lazy re-tread of the Death Star rather than a knowing homage. One wonders what film he thought Edwards wanted to bring to the screen. It is public knowledge that the film's final act was extensively re-written and much of it was re-shot. But it is public knowledge that originally the two main characters were thought of as surviving to the end of the film and the intervention from Lucasfilm and Disney actually gave the two main characters no escape: their attack is actually a suicide mission and everybody dies. Perhaps Disney actually made the film more adult and sombre, rather than allowing the heroes to escape so the children watching with their parents are not traumatised.

For some fans, no Disney involvement in Star Wars should be allowed, because they believe Disney make bad films and the sale of Lucasfilm to them is the end of the wider universe they cared about. Someone called 1649 posts a biting critique on 18 December 2016 at 11:23

Are they making the same film over and over and over again. The aching panoramas, the crowded market scenes - beings wearing big silver hats - the bars with strange creatures being cooked. Oh the majesty, the claustrophobia the predictability! A collage

of the best bits - sorry scenes - from the earlier films, all glued together with slick effects and the sort of fake Disney pathos that bores. I damned near fell asleep, the guy I went with did. Poor.

1649 clearly thinks both of the new films are rubbish because Disney are imposing their will on every aspect of the films. As such, they are merely repeating the same weird aliens in slightly different weird locations, with 'slick effects' pasting together a re-tread of all the best bits of the original films. The effects are indeed slick and expensive, showcasing the look and feel of other Disney films released by Marvel, for example (Flanagan, Livingstone and McKenny 2016). All blockbuster genre films suffer from the weight of expectations – that all films have to have loads of explosions and fights and battles and laser blasts to be successful at the box office. But this is not a fault of Disney – actually, George Lucas set the bar for this genre film driven by fights and effects (Taylor 2015). 1649 should point the finger at Lucas, not Disney, for the explosions. However, 1649 is right to challenge the fake pathos that has become an infuriating norm in genre movies and mainstream best-sellers (Flanagan, Livingstone and McKenny 2016) and it is present in all the new Star War films made by Disney. People seem to want to be moved by simple emotions and emotional complexity seems absent in all present-day movies aiming to make money.

Discussion

From the analysis above it is clear that science-fiction fans are constrained by the culture industry's hegemony over what constitutes culture. Star Wars is a global franchise owned by one of the most notorious sections of the culture industry (Adorno 1991). Even when George Lucas was battling for funding with studios in the seventies, he was a product of Hollywood and America and his films were sold to audiences around the world with the backing of American cultural and economic capital. Moreover, science-fiction – and science-fiction film work - is considered less high-brow than the high art of the theatre. Being a fan of Star Wars is to be stereotyped as the naïve fool being duped into submission and being enslaved under the hegemony of the ruling elites. Being a fan of Star Wars is to be stereotyped as the person who prefers killings and explosions and toys and comics to social engagement and political activism (Taylor 2015).

Certainly, there is some truth to those stereotypes and one can see some of the instrumentality and hegemony at work in the fans who blindly love whatever is made for them by Lucasfilm and Disney, as seen above. For these fans, there can never be enough merchandise

to buy, books and comics to read and things to watch. Performing the role of the über fan below the line allows them to boast of their knowledge of books beyond the canon and minor characters that will only have their name known through the marketing of a Star Wars figure in the eighties. For these fans, being into Star Wars means showing that they are obsessed with Star Wars enough to pass the fandom to their children. These are fans who want to show people reading the comments that they have bought everything, including the baby-clothes designed to make a youngling⁵ look like a Jawa.

Furthermore, some of the fans in this paper clearly despise the (slow) turn to diversity and social justice in the mainstream of Western society, as they see Star Wars and science-fiction fandom as something that serves their white, heterosexual male identities and power. They see their popular culture and leisure spaces being taken over by the Other, even as the Other is threatening them in work and domestic spaces. This is a false ideology associated with the darker reaches of the internet (Spracklen 2015), but which has emerged in the populism that has put fascists and other rightists in high office. White, heterosexual men remain in power across the world and their rights (and their leisure and culture) remain privileged even if challenged by legislation and progressive politics. In this sense, and the materialist, instrumental one, Star Wars fandom below the line and its performativity, remains deeply problematic. For the hegemonic white men, Star Wars fandom gives them freedom to reject the Other and tell lies about the liberal nature of Star Wars and its fans. For fans who just want to show they have bought the material stuff, they are slaves to the instrumental rationality of the culture industry and modern capitalism.

But fandom can be a communicative leisure space: in truth, it is one of the spaces where human agency still exists. No one is forced to write below the line – every word written is a free act, a moment or performativity of communicative leisure. The culture industry may be constructed in such a way that there is a limit to how taste is constructed and used, but nobody is forced to be a Star Wars fan. Being a genre fan is to be something unfashionable. It might be argued that making the choice to be a science-fiction fan is a way of rejecting the norms and values imposed on culture by hegemony. Fans perform identity and community through arguing with each other over *Rogue One*, Star Wars and Disney. On *The Guardian* web-site, they perform and play with the norms of the liberal bourgeoisie, or challenge those norms by their rejection. But they also play at and challenge science-fiction fandom by being playful, transgressive and contrary.

⁵ A term used in the Prequel Trilogy for young children, derided by many critics.

Conclusion

For fans, collective memory is used to try to construct their authenticity and their ownership of Star Wars, but that collective memory is only ever temporarily negotiated. The collective memory of fans is constructed through a performance of communicative leisure and agency. This means that leisure spaces such as Star Wars fandom offer fans a sense of identity, meaning and purpose – but also reinforce existing patterns of inequality such as hegemonic masculinity. They also serve to perpetuate the instrumental logic of present-day global capitalism, so Star Wars fandom (online or in the real world) is, at best, a space for resistance and, at worst, a space for submission.

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